

Your Teachers are Researchers: Changing Research Culture

Blog post

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This post reflects upon the event 'Your Teachers are Researchers', held as part of Sussex Law School's [Research Seminar Series](#) on 26 November 2020. It is written by [Verona Ní Drisceoil](#) (co-organiser and chair) and [Bal Sokhi-Bulley](#) (co-organiser and panellist) with input from the panel of staff (Neemah Ahamed, Matt Evans, Sabrina Gilani and Lucy Welsh) and from the student voices (Henry Bonsor, Jasmine Bundhoo, Ayo Idowu-Bello and Tyrone Logue) who participated in and facilitated the event.

Introduction

There was bhangra and then there was jazz. There were staff and there were students. And then there was a space of collaboration and 'collaborators'. On 26 November in an otherwise usual Week 9 of term, students and faculty of Sussex Law School (SLS) came together in a shared, non-hierarchical space to reflect, relate and disrupt. The result was a powerful, moving and liberatory one. In that shared space, collectively, and in friendship, we had succeeded in doing research relationally – building *relationships with*, rather than just being in the same room as, our students. We created a 'liberatory space' (Jivraj, [2020](#)) wherein we were able to *be otherwise*.

'Your Teachers are Researchers' grew out of a desire for connectedness in these times of pandemic; to breach the staff/student binary and grow a research culture that shared a space with the students with whom we do 'research-led teaching'. In this respect, the event drew inspiration from Fung's vision of a 'connected curriculum' (Fung [2017](#)), from Freire on dialogue (1970) and bell hooks (1994) calling for the teaching and learning experience to be different; one that can be shared and transgressed, together. This vision strongly echoes Jivraj's ([2020](#)) call to engage in 'self-liberatory' processes, that can only be achieved through a focus on relationality – between staff and their students – allowing us all to 'belong' to, and in, the academy.

A False Binary

In that space, we discovered that the staff/student binary is a false one; we had instead become 'collaborators'. The event was deliberately organised to remove the normative hierarchy of faculty/student. Students, as opposed to their teachers, led and facilitated the session. Faculty were decentred. Final year students Henry and Jasmine began with powerful reflections on what research-led teaching means to them. Eloquently, they shared how the *Law and Critique* module convened by Bal and Sabrina had offered a space to be 'intellectually creative and sensitive' (Jasmine) and distilled our shared roles as activists, writers and thinkers, as, ultimately, to 'make the word a better place' (Henry). They spoke too of how the module had helped them to grow in confidence – to find voice and expression – and equipped them with the 'tools' to go out and 'flourish'. Ayo and Tyrone (Year 1) followed by introducing the panel of faculty speakers: Bal, Sabrina, Neemah, Matt and Lucy. Their introductions were thoughtful and generous; their questions, powerful and insightful. They set the bar high!

Faculty then spoke to their experience of teaching their research and to something they were currently or had recently been working on. Over the course of the evening, we were able to share that doing research is slow, requires resilience and is personal to us. Bal spoke to how she felt compelled to write about the intersections between pandemic, race and class over the summer when the Leicester Lockdown happened. Her reference to the labelling of BAME communities as ‘dirt’ was picked up by Sabrina, who questioned what it means to be ‘human’ in the context of criminal law and punishment, focusing on how we express and recognise humanity through material engagement. We then heard about the intersectional experience of women of colour from Neemah, who played us Nina Simone’s ‘Four Women’. We were reminded of the wider, problematic space that we inhabit as individuals within higher education by Matt, who interrogated the space of the neoliberal university. And we heard about what it means, in the context of a wider neoliberal Britain, to make claims to access justice from Lucy, and how as staff and students of law we can and ought to question exactly what ‘justice’ means.

The presentations were punctuated with a flurry of questions – ranging from Alex (LLM Human Rights) asking Bal about whether Trump should do ‘friendship’ with China to remedy the blame culture he began; to Ayo asking Neemah about colourism and the different experience of lighter and darker skinned black women; to Tyrone asking Lucy about the nexus between the economy and access to justice. There were also questions about the potential impact our research has. For instance, Vanessa (LLM) asked Lucy about the process, as an academic and researcher, of impacting change in the criminal justice system.

Reflecting on the event immediately afterwards brought up feelings of pride, warmth and a sense of freedom (from the usual hierarchies and the ‘right way’ to treat our students). Verona commented on how the event made her heart feel full – in that space, she said, ‘something special happened’. Bal said she was ‘blown away by the student participation. Henry, Jasmine, Ayo and Tyrone were exceptional – eloquent, engaged and I felt both proud of them and reaffirmed in our roles as educators/researchers’. ‘It was fantastic to take part in such a well-attended event and to have the chance to actually have a conversation with students, guided by them, about research, teaching, learning, their overlaps and the environments in which they take place,’ said Matt. Lucy expressed that, ‘it was invigorating/uplifting to create a place for discussion together and see how superficially disparate interests can be brought together in a shared space of friendship and creativity’.

Building on the theme of friendship and connectedness, Henry commented,

for me, the most meaningful aspect of the event was created by the relationality between both teachers and students. Previously, I felt like research was something that teachers performed in their own time and only shared with their peers.

Similarly, Ayo spoke of how this event was so much more than an event about researchers talking about their research. She said that

this event gave me a sense of community and togetherness which is something that I had not felt since moving to Sussex due to the exceptional circumstances of a pandemic... This event created a space where there was no hierarchy, there were no tutors and students because for those few hours, we were all students who were there to listen, learn and critique one another.

For Tyrone, ‘the event made space for direct engagement with tutors’ allowing, he said, ‘for a valuable discourse which is often all too elusive in the conventional classroom’. Finally, Jo Bridgeman, Law, Politics and Sociology ‘research guru’, [tweeted](#) ‘this was fabulous... the staff and student contributions were outstanding.’

Building Community Through Research: Changing Culture

Pointing to the potential for collaborative opportunities, Sabrina has since found research synergies with several students in attendance (including Daniel and Amanda from Year 1) and commented on how the event is likely to shape future projects between teachers *with* (not just ‘and’) students. ‘Your Teachers are Researchers’ transgressed the teaching-research divide in a unique and holistic way; it created a space of shared mutual respect where everyone’s voice was heard (hence, ‘student voices’), and everyone’s presence acknowledged. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education (Freire, 1970). In a similar vein, hooks reminds us that ‘it is not sufficient to create an exciting learning process. To generate excitement, is to ensure interest in one another and in hearing one another’s voices’ (hooks, 1994: 8).

Over the past three decades or so, forces both at a national and global level have tended to silence disparate voices and pull research and teaching apart (Barnett in Fung [2017](#)). Siloed performance indicators such as TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework), REF (Research Excellence Framework) and KEF (Knowledge Exchange Framework) remind us that so much of our lives are about measurement and thus control; this event was freeing in allowing us to relate in a creative non-regulatory way. Against the background of measurement, Fung calls for a different approach: a truly symbiotic relationship between teaching and research. This, she suggests, begins with explicitly inviting students, at all levels, to connect with researchers and the research environment (Fung, [2017](#)). Involving students in shared spaces of dialogue and critical engagement is an integral part of the learning journey. The benefit of this shared dialogue, of course, is not unilateral. The symbiosis provides a dual benefit in the form of opportunity for authentic co-creation. In this space, students become partners, co-researchers and co-producers as opposed to passive consumers (see further Carmichael et al, [2020](#)). There is, perhaps then, a move towards joint ownership and joint decision-making where students inspire research.

SLS, like many law schools, is following the trend of trying to ‘decolonise’ its curriculum. We echo Jivraj in recognising that this process of decolonisation will only happen through ‘doing’ relationality together in recognition of belonging. It was not our intention to ‘decolonise’ here – but this is the point. As Adebisi ([2020](#)) reminds us, ‘[d]ecolonisation is also a reflective practice in which we as academics much constantly adapt our own pedagogies and question our own practices’. *That* is what we were doing – reflecting on our practices and attempting a counter-pedagogy that resists the hierarchies of knowledge transfer and we did so also through an active recognition of the need to include voices from BAME students and staff (on the problematic construction of ‘BAME’, see further Adebisi [2019](#)). Counter-pedagogy, performed in such organic and holistic spaces, provides possibility for a true reimagining of the core purpose of universities and that is a hopeful thing.

Conclusion

The presentations began with some bhangra, which Bal described as not simply gratuitous! But, rather, a manifestation of both ‘sonic intimacy’ (James, 2020) and resistance (given the

roots of UK bhangra and its growth alongside race riots). These vibes remain with us – we created an intimate space and a space that resisted the normative boundaries of the staff/student relation. We hope to continue to challenge this binary and to grow the research culture at SLS *with our students* as we continue to do our research, teaching and encounters with each other *otherwise*.

References and Further Reading

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hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education and the Freedom of Practice*. New York, Routledge.

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Staff Panel/Papers

[Neemah Ahamed](#), ‘What Do They Call Me? On the Poetry and Lyrics of Audre Lorde and Nina Simone’

[Matt Evans](#), ‘The neoliberal university and resistance in the current crisis’

[Sabrina Gilani](#), ‘Material Rights and Embodied Cruelty: Encountering the Constitutionality of Capital Punishment’

[Bal Sokhi-Bulley](#), ‘From Exotic to “Dirty”’: How the Pandemic has Re-colonised Leicester’

[Lucy Welsh](#), ‘Accessing justice in criminal courts. Is it all about legal aid?’

Authors

Verona Ní Drisceoil is a Senior Lecturer in Law (Education and Scholarship) at SLS. Verona is currently working on two projects. One, with Imogen Moore (Bristol), exploring 'confidence, community and voice' in law school transitions and another exploring inclusion, exclusion and hierarchies in law schools. This second project asks, 'who is not in the room and why not?'.

Bal Sokhi-Bulley is a Senior Lecturer in Law and Critical Theory at SLS. She writes and teaches on critical approaches to rights, and is currently working on using the concept of 'friendship' to re-imagine rights in the hostile environment; this work features in her courses on Law and Critique, Human Rights: Critical Perspectives, and Migration Rights and Governance.